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White House Briefs Hill on Iran Contacts

Poindexter Concedes 'a Miscalculation'

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President Reagan's national security adviser has told key members of Congress that the White House made "a miscalculation on who it could trust in Iran" when it secretly established contacts there who eventually helped gain release of American hostages held in Lebanon, according to sources familiar with the discussions.

Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, who headed the program, has begun briefing key legislators involved in foreign policy on the general aspects of the effort, in part to make the argument that details of the project must remain secret to protect contacts in Iran.

According to sources, Poindexter said U.S. envoys "were finding opportunities" to work with some elements in the government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini "as long as they were not exposed."

He said, according to sources, that once Iranian officials competing for power disclosed the Tehran visit by former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane, the program came to a temporary halt.

But, according to one legislator who has been briefed, the White House believes "we need to keep the channels open." One source said, "Public acknowledgment of relationships would make what is already fragile far worse, particularly internally in Iran."

Because of that, Poindexter argued that he be permitted to present Congress with the "plan in generalities," sources said. The White House has "a whole network of people to protect," one source said. They include not only Iranians, but also people outside that country, sources said.

The White House program, which went forward despite objections from Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Secretary of

Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, involved permitting arms to be shipped by Israel to Iran in return for help from Tehran officials in gaining release of Americans held by pro-Iran terrorists in Lebanon.

Reagan met in the Oval Office yesterday on the issue with Shultz, Weinberger, Vice President Bush, CIA Director William J. Casey, Attorney General Edwin Meese III, chief of staff Donald T. Regan, Poindexter and his deputy, Alton G. Keel.

In a statement last night, presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said Reagan, at the meeting, discussed efforts to gain release of the remaining hostages. Speakes stressed that the advisers were "unanimous" in supporting Reagan. However, the statement did not detail what was discussed.

Shultz, en route to Guatemala last night for a meeting of the Organization of American States, told reporters he has "no plans to resign."

According to Speakes, Reagan said that no U.S. laws "have or will be violated and that our policy of not making concessions to terrorists remains intact." Speakes said the meeting was prompted by Reagan's concern that "speculative stories" in the news media may put the remaining hostages "at risk."

Reagan also asked the advisers to "ensure" that their agencies "refrain from making comments or speculating about these matters."

Speakes said it was possible that the White House would invoke executive privilege if Congress sought information on the Iran episode, but said it would be handled on a case-by-case basis.

Since the secret White House arms-for-hostages program was disclosed, an increasing number of legislators have called for congressional hearings. One reason the program was conducted out of the National Security Council rather than the Central Intelligence Agency, according to sources, was to avoid disclosing it to Senate and House intelligence committees, which closely monitor and conduct hearings on CIA activities but not normally on NSC programs.

Poindexter reportedly has said he would brief those committees "at an appropriate point." Other administration officials have also said that more details on the program would be made public when the remaining six hostages are released.

Three U.S. hostages have been freed since September 1985, apparently as a result of arms shipments to Iran. The latest, David Jacobsen, was released in Beirut on Nov. 2.

At the White House yesterday, Speakes said "our expectations were not met" about the release of further hostages. "Our hopes were dashed once again," he said, faulting news coverage.

"We had very, very real hopes that additional hostages would be released," Speakes said. "They have not been released, which indicates to you that for some reason this has not happened."

Other sources said that, based on the arms shipments provided to Iran, a hostage release in addition to Jacobsen had been expected last week.

Shortly after Jacobsen's release, however, a pro-Syrian magazine in Lebanon published a report on McFarlane's clandestine visit to Tehran and meeting there with officials. The information was deliberately released to the magazine, sources said, in an attempt to embarrass Iranian officials working with McFarlane.

The next day, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, mocked the McFarlane visit and he and other Iranian officials since then have competed in attacking the United States.

"There is a lot of political infighting in Iran," one legislator familiar with Poindexter's briefing said yesterday, "but all our channels are still open and workable once things calm down."

One source said it is "quite something that the White House would trust some [Iranian] mullah and not the leaders of the Senate."

Poindexter reportedly said he recognized it was a "risky" approach but that the payoff was also high if a relationship could be established with Tehran and the gulf war between Iran and Iraq brought to an end.

Other sources, however, criticized the program after hearing Poindexter, saying it "might have been well-conceived, but it was ill-executed."

The White House undertook the plan despite its publicly announced official policy of refusing to pay ransom for hostages and presidential statements accusing the Tehran regime of being one of the prime supporters of international terrorism.

While the secret talks were going on and arms shipments had begun, Shultz and other U.S. officials were seeking to persuade U.S. allies to halt their own arms shipments to Tehran.

Although Poindexter told legislators that freeing hostages was not the "prime" aim of the program, it did become a basic part of it, according to sources.

Newsweek reported that two cargo planes delivered arms in September 1985, rather than one as originally agreed, to obtain release of the Rev. Benjamin Weir. According to the Newsweek account, confirmed by Israeli sources, an Israeli

middleman was offered \$10 million for the first arms shipment instead of a hostage, and had to refuse the money, demand the hostage's release and promise a second arms shipment before Weir was released.

In a related development, the Rev. Lawrence Martin Jenco, who was released in July after arms shipments were made, said he opposed such trades because they could prolong the war between Iran and Iraq.

But another former hostage, Jeremy Levin, said at the same news conference that he would support such a deal although he preferred some other option.

As expected, U.S. involvement in shipping military equipment and spare parts to Iran was raised yesterday in the legal case of arms dealers accused of conspiring to break the U.S. ban on weapons sales to Iran. The case, involving 17 people, including a retired Israeli general, is scheduled for trial in U.S. District Court in Manhattan in February. Defense attorney William Kunstler yesterday filed a motion seeking records relating to the U.S. effort to ship weapons to Iran.